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ABSTRACT

Noting the important influence of a positive home-school relationship on children's academic achievement, this study explored some of the factors that can prevent parents from becoming involved in their child's school. A questionnaire consisting of 25 statements to be answered on a five-point Likert scale, and four open-ended questions was distributed to a sample of parents whose children attended prekindergarten, day care, or nursery school programs. The sample was representative of a wide range of socioeconomic, racial and cultural backgrounds. Results indicated several factors that can increase parent participation, including: (1) schedule-accommodating meetings; (2) workshops on homework, social and academic development, and volunteer services in the classroom; (3) communication on class activities; (4) communication with the administrators, (5) opportunities for parents to discuss common issues together; (6) meaningful participation; and (7) consistent integration of multicultural education. Based on these results, it was suggested that parents tend to stay away from volunteering or becoming involved for many reasons, but mainly because the teachers are apparently not effectively trained to involve the diverse families found in today's schools. Most parents view home and school as a partnership; they need teachers to welcome the partnership. (AA)

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Here We Are Together...

Together At School

Melanie Gultz

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Abstract

It is a well-known fact that when parents feel comfortable enough to be involved in their children's education, everyone benefits. This study was designed to find out why parents would not feel comfortable becoming involved in their child's school. Parents tend to stay away from volunteering or becoming involved for many reasons, mainly because the teachers are apparently not effectively trained to involve the diverse families found in today's schools. Most parents view home and school as a partnership; they need for the teachers to welcome this partnership. Findings will help teachers and parents to secure ways in which to form a secure working relationship that will eventually benefit the children.

Introduction

Positive relationships between home and school and the need for parent involvement in education has been a major concern among educators for decades. While there has been a widespread increase of interest in the field of home/school relations, one serious flaw has been noticed. Most of what has been done is viewed from professional perspectives through the eyes of schools and teachers, rather than the perspectives of parents and their children (Atkin, Bastiani, and others, 1988, p. ix). Many parents are made to feel that their children's education is not any of their business and that contact with their children's schools should be limited to fund raising or offering an extra pair of hands when needed (p. 4). Many educators are not comfortable with parent involvement. The nature and extent of contact between parents and teachers has often been linked to the professionals who have tried to protect their autonomy, ascribing to the parents a marginal role in their child's education (p. 74). All too often, teachers and administrators do not know how to work with parents even though they realize the many benefits of parent participation (Kroth & Scholl, 1978, p. 2). Many parents attempt to become involved, but often become discouraged when their efforts are not recognized (p. 3). Parents often feel unwelcome or vague about their role in their children's education. The reason for many negative parental attitudes results from their

negative relationship with school staff in the past. Some parents have expectations for their children's schooling based on their own school experiences (Chaukin, 1989, p.120; Herrera & Wooden, 1988, P.80). It becomes apparent that schools need to change attitudes from negative to positive by conducting well-planned opportunities of parent involvement (Kroth & Scholl, 1978, p.17).

When planning a program of parent involvement, it is important to become familiar with, and respect the value system of, parents. Teachers need to avoid stereotyping the diverse cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and family formations that are represented in today's classrooms. Generalizations concerning certain groups should never be accepted. Parents have many reasons for not being involved in the schools. Many lack interest due to the messages they receive. Teachers encountering parents form a variety of backgrounds, experiences and viewpoints may fall into the all-too-human tendency to stereotype people, their conditions, and actions. Parents in turn, may avoid contact with teachers whose manner, communication style, and expectations are different from their own (Gestwicki, p. 98). If parents seem hesitant to volunteer, it is important to find out why. Parents may feel embarrassed by language skills or may find it financially difficult due to the lack of transportation (Ross, 1995, p. 53; Greenberg, 1989, p. 73). Although minority parents are interested in becoming more involved in their children's schools, they are often not invited to participate (Chavkin, 1989, p. 120). Minority parents have a right to be involved. All too often communication between

parents and teachers does not occur because of lack of resources (p. 123). Another reason for the parent's feelings may be that certain kinds of oral and written communication from school alienate parents. This problem is compounded when the school and parents speak a different language literally as well as figuratively (Herrera & Wooden, p. 78).

All parents have the right to be involved in their children's education as well as an obligation. Parents are entitled to be consulted, and participate in the education and development of their children. Just as important is that schools need the support of their parents. Schools need to welcome the support of parents and realize that parents are vitally important and a valuable resource, which unfortunately most schools do not recognize (Atkin, et al, 1988, p.7). Parents are naturally the most important people in their children's lives. A teacher who tends to confuse her role with being a "substitute" for parents creates a poor environment. A teacher should create an atmosphere of warmth and understanding. A teacher who needs to feel more important to the child than the parents however, has stepped onto dangerous territory and have a tendency to blame the parents for the child's shortcomings (Gestwicki, 1987, p. 101). The primary point is that parents feel welcome and become involved in their children's school. When they know their opinions are important to the school and will be considered in making decisions (Herrera & Wooden, p. 80). Parents need to know their efforts are appreciated. A positive attitude and supportive messages from teachers will contribute to a positive outlook on schools by children.

There is growing support for the view that when teachers and parents share some of the same goals and work to gether in an active partnership the gains that children make are evident (Atkin, p. 12). The learning experiences teachers can offer children in the classroom are multiplied and enhanced by parents who feel invited and included. In addition to a positive relationship between parent involvement and academics, there tends to be an increase in student attendance, improved attitudes and behavior and more parent-community support of the school (Chaukin, 19989, p. 119). Partnership encourages a high degree of family enthusiasm for children's self-esteem and boosts their regard for themselves as learners (Greenberg, 1989, p.61). Teachers who accept the partnership consider parents not as a problem, but as a part of a solution to common problems. This belief in partnership requires teachers to define their professionalism in a new way, to see themselves as leaders of an educational team, using their special skills and knowledge to enlist the help of parents. As partners, teachers believe parents are capable of growth and in turn grow themselves (Gestwicki, 1987, p.110). This growth process needs to be ongoing for results to be effective.

Method

Why would a parent avoid taking an active part in their child's education? Do parents feel welcome in their child's school? Are parents

respected and made to feel that they have something to offer? In many cases, parents do not feel comfortable approaching educators and administrators. It is important for us to investigate these questions so that we may develop a partnership between home and school.

Questionnaires consisted of twenty-five statements, to be answered on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "always" to "never", and four, open-ended questions (see table 1). They were distributed to parents whose children attend prekindergarten day care or nursery school programs. Parents of children who attend an after school program were also given the same questionnaire. These children are enrolled in kindergarten through second grade at a public school. If a family had children in more than one school, one questionnaire for each school was distributed. Families represented a wide range of socioeconomic, racial and cultural backgrounds. Parents were asked to be as honest as possible. To ensure anonymity, parents were asked not to sign their names or identify themselves in any way other than noting their children's grade level. A large envelope was provided, so that the parents could return their responses without handing them to the researcher.

Table 1: Parents' Responses to Questionaire

Question	always	almost always	sometimes	almost never	never
Participation is favored on the condition of acceptance of school philosophy.	12	23	46	15	4
The school expects parents to become involved.	35	50	15		
Teachers use volunteers creatively to meet the needs of the classroom.	23	23	46	4	4
Effective communication between parents and teachers and students is necessary for good school relations.	88	4	8		
Parent observers are welcome in the classroom.	23	27	38	4	8
There is an early warning system for notifying parents if a child is having problems.	19	23	42	12	4
Parents are asked for advice on how to deal with their children.	19	11	27	35	8
Teachers are effectively trained in their dealings with divorced families.	31	19	46		4
School makes an effort to understand and respect cultural and economic diversities.	27	19	42	12	
The teacher tells the parents the good as well as the bad.	42	27	23	8	
The teacher talks to parents in person or on the phone in addition to sending written messages.	50	15	27	8	

Results are reported in percent (%).
Results reflect statements and questions which yielded significant results.

Results

The following responses are reflected in table 1.

Parents surveyed reported that schools expect parents to become involved (always-35%, almost always-50%). However, involvement seems to become difficult when there is a disagreement about school philosophy. Refer to table to see how parents feel about participating under such conditions. Parents' resources go untapped, because teachers do not use parents to meet the needs of the classroom. Almost half (46%) of the parents feel that only sometimes they are seen as effective in becoming a classroom volunteer.

An overwhelming 88% of parents surveyed felt that effective communication between parents and teachers and students is necessary for good home/school relations. However, only 19% (always) and 23% (almost always) receive an early warning if a child is having problems. Although communication does not seem to be a significant issue with this particular group of parents, because most reported that the teacher tells the parents the positive things as well as the negative (42%-always) and also talks to parents in person or on the phone in addition to sending home notes (50%-always). Responses are not significantly reflected on the scale (almost never or never).

One area that seems to be an issue with most parents is the need for teachers to be better trained when dealing with diverse family situations. Only 31% feel that teachers are always effective when

dealing with divorced parents, but a significant 46% reported only sometimes. Similar results were found when asked if the school makes an effort to understand cultural and economic diversities (42%-sometimes, 12%-almost never).

Many parents felt that their children were receiving a good education, however, better communication between home and school was found to be necessary. One open-ended question asked: "Do you truly believe that the home/school relationship should be a partnership? Or, do you believe that your child's education is solely the school's responsibility?" Most parents strongly believed that the home/school relationship must be a partnership for the benefit of the child. Parents surveyed noted that involvement begins at home, reading to their children, helping with homework, and giving children many experiences are vital responsibilities of a true partnership. Parents said that a true partnership requires a balance between academics and social development between home and school. Another question asked: "Explain how you would feel more welcome in your child's school." A majority of parents receive accurate information about their children's education, but a need for more parent-teacher conferences was important, or at least notification in note form or via phone about the progress of the their children. An early warning system would be helpful in case of potential problems. Parents also want "good news" notes when a child is doing well. The same question brought forth many individual responses:

- meetings need to be scheduled at varying times to allow all parents to attend.

- workshops: homework, social and academic development, "how to" volunteer services in the classroom.

- more communication and general information on class activities.

- more opportunities to visit or volunteer in classroom.

- a need for better communication by the administration.

- opportunities for parents to get together to discuss common issues.

- a desire to feel respected and that parents had something positive to contribute.

- consistent integration of multicultural education -- not only "a week or two at a time".

Conclusion

In order for children to succeed in school, a positive home-school relationship is necessary. Teachers, who form partnerships with parents have a strong sense of self. They are not easily manipulated, not do they try to treat others with dignity, relate as one individual to another, and most importantly, avoid stereotyping (Gestwicki, 1987, p.110). One problem preventing many school teachers from doing all they wish to in the way of working with all kinds of parents results from no or poor training on the part of teacher education institutions (Greenberg, 1989,

p.67). We urgently need more teacher educators who can show us the way to work with all parents (p.68). Teacher education programs must train teachers in the multicultural, economic, and family diversity of the children in our ever changing society. When we learn to understand the children within the sometimes complex nature of the family, we will then be able to begin to really teach and except all kinds of parent participation. Teachers who move into partnerships with parents express a genuine respect for parents, as the most important people in their children's lives (Gestwicki, 1987, p.112).

An effective home-school relationship is based on many factors. A school must accept that all parents have a right to be involved in their children's education. Parents from all backgrounds need to be supported, respected, and acknowledged as vital resources with skills and experiences that could enhance learning. Parents want to learn what is going on in the school and to develop an interest and appreciation for what schools are doing. Schools gain valuable assistance from parents, individually and in groups (Kroth, p.26).

Schools need to promote environments in which parents are valued as primary influences in their children's lives and are essential partners in the education of their children (Galen, 1991, p.18). Teachers must not take the misguided seat of highest honor by referring to themselves as substitute parents (Seiderman, 1997, p. 48). Parents want to be asked for their advice on how to deal with their children so that potential problems may be avoided. Teachers and schools must

recognize that the development and education of the child is enhanced by parents' positive interaction with the school and by building on parents' strengths (Galen, 1991, p. 18; Seiderman, 1997, p. 48). Parents are often untapped resources, they are capable of doing more than making a few phone calls, baking cookies, or going on class trips. Many parents would volunteer to read to the children, give an art lesson, talk about their careers or give workshops.

A primary factor leading towards a welcoming atmosphere and a reliable partnership is effective communication. Parents need to feel more involved with detailed, frequent, and accurate communication with teachers about their children's progress (Amundson, 1988, p. 84). Sending home "good news" notes and developing home teaching activities (how to help with homework) are ways to include parents in their children's education (p. 84). All parents want and need to be involved in this way. It is important to create a climate of trust and to realize the needs and interests of parents as critically relevant (Seiderman, 1997, p. 49).

Although the results of this survey reflect a somewhat positive parental perception of attitudes by school and teachers toward parental involvement, more research is needed concerning schools in low and upper income communities in order to make a comparative study which would possibly reflect a wider range of opinions. It is the responsibility of home and school, school and home to ensure the success of children. When schools welcome parents involvement in education and accept the

necessary partnership of home and school, teachers and parents, schools and children thrive.

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